

Stevia - EU approval and global demand

The EU approved stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*) last fall as a food additive for foods and beverages. The approval, specifically intended for stevia's sweetening compounds (steviol glycosides), comes at a time when consumers increasingly demand products with little or no added sugars. According to market research group Datamonitor, global launches of products with "no sugar added" positioning increased from 490 to 2308 during 2009–2010.

But an EU approval is just the beginning for stevia foods in Europe. While proponents of the zero-calorie, natural sweetener are understandably smitten over its growing recognition, the European legislation (as it currently reads) presents some initial challenges.

Stevia-sweetened products must have the ingredient listed under its designated E number **E 960** which may be accompanied by the ingredient name **steviol glycosides**. This isn't doing much for the average consumer who isn't yet familiar with the stevia plant, much less the name of its scientifically active compound.

A listing of stevia leaf or stevia extract elsewhere on product packaging would make for a "friendlier" label, but allowing alternative wording will be up to individual member states. Marketers may also wish to fall back on images of the stevia plant, if authorized.

An Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) for steviol glycosides set at 4 mg/kg of body weight presents another challenge. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA; Parma, Italy), the health body that established the ADI, considers it a "conservative" level that might still be exceeded by some users.

Flavored soft drinks are predicted to be the biggest contributors of stevia to the EU diet. Exposure limits in these products specifically may be subject to change. EFSA says that it will reassess this ADI in the future, following information it will request from producers and users of steviol glycosides.

But even with intangibles like these yet to be clarified, the notion of mass stevia consumption in Europe isn't going anywhere. Whereas EFSA directives allow member states a "take it or leave it" approach to legislation, the stevia approval comes in the form of a regulation, something the International Stevia Council (Brussels) affirms cannot be denied in any member state.

"Steviol glycosides have been authorized through a Commission Regulation and therefore EU member states have to implement the legal text in full," said the International Stevia Council's executive director Maria Teresa Scardigli. "They do not have the freedom to deny the use of stevia at a national level."

Response from Artificial Sweeteners

Stevia's approval in Europe casts a little more uncertainty on the artificial sweetener industry worldwide. To make Europe's case more interesting, EFSA recently announced its intent to speed up a risk assessment of the artificial sweetener aspartame, from its original 2020 deadline to a much earlier deadline of 2012. [Rising concern from regulatory bodies and consumers over artificial sweeteners has already led suppliers to take stock in stevia and other alternatives.](#) Shortly following the EU's stevia approval, Chicago-based Merisant, which supplies the artificial sweetener Equal, expanded its Misura stevia line with a launch of the first tabletop stevia sweetener in Italy. Other companies have made similar advancements.